

How Ideological Polarization Harms Society

I recently overheard a friend of mine disgustedly muttering at his phone. Contrary to what one might think, his disgust was not over problems with his hand-held device; instead, it was over a notification he had just received from Reddit.

The notification explained that he had been banned from the board entitled “Black Lives Matter.” Confused, he said, “I’ve never even posted on that board! Why am I banned?!”

It then became clear. He had been banned simply because he’d posted an article on another board whose name referenced the current president.

His amazement was palpable. Why in the world would one message board jump to such a quick conclusion about him simply because he had posted in another, allegedly opposite-minded, board? What if he actually agreed with the tenets of the Black Lives Matter board more than the one named after President Trump? Did it not matter if he wanted to learn from and discuss with people from both sides of the political aisle, agreeing with one side on some things and the other side on others?

Apparently nothing is new under the sun, for a similar thing troubled journalists George Orwell and Malcolm Muggeridge. In his autobiography, [*Chronicles of Wasted Time*](#), Muggeridge recounts the turmoil leading up to World War II. One of his frustrations about this time was the apparent prohibition to think outside of a set party line. The same held true for Orwell during the Spanish Civil War:

“When I got to know him [Orwell], we often discussed how difficult it is, in an ideologically polarized society like ours, to take up any position without being automatically assumed to hold all the views and attitudes associated with

*it. Like voting the ticket in an American election, when by just pressing one button support is automatically accorded to a whole string of candidates for all sorts of offices. Thus to attack the Soviet or the Spanish Republican regime was automatically to support their Fascist or Nazi opponents; to expose the fatuities of the liberal mind, to commend the authoritarian one. Orwell's devastating exposure of the pursuit of power through revolution in Animal Farm, and of the maintenance of power for power's own sake in 1984, was intended to show, with the desperate intensity of an utterly honest mind, that the world of the mid-twentieth century was moving towards a collectivized way of life, **whose only truth would be slogans, whose only duty would be conformity and whose only morality would be power.** Admittedly, the pioneer and first exemplar in this field was the USSR, but the trend, as was to become increasingly apparent, was universal."*

Today we live our lives in 10-second soundbites and 280 characters. We align ourselves with a particular candidate or a certain party. We immediately [blacklist](#) any individual who makes a misstep in word or action. In essence, we live in a society where truth is replaced by slogans and absolute loyalty to a certain viewpoint is demanded.

But is such a state healthy? Unless we are willing to open ourselves up to criticism and freely weigh, discuss, and consider the ideologies behind opposing viewpoints – adopting some while rejecting others – will we not continue to relegate ourselves to a society where contention reigns supreme?